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NOTES AND COMMENTS.

A TILT AT A BLACK MONSTER.

IN OLDEN days, when symbol was a prominent factor in material and spiritual life, there resulted many conditions which had good reasons for being. A setting of dramatic effectiveness accompanied almost every action. The popular mind was moved by object lessons; for man had not yet progressed beyond the demonstrative age. But little by little this aspect changed. The matter-of-fact superseded the romantic, until at last the individual and the state hardened into the present mould of materialism. Iconoclastic hammers beat against the gates of every temple; a call arose for originality in thought and repression in conduct. Pruning scissors nipped at all conventionality, from costume to sentiment, until there came to be small reverence and less precedent; the boldness and freedom that dared revolt was the first requisite of mental behavior. We learned to dote upon eccentricity, whatever form it assumed—which was fortunate, since realism often gave an extremely ugly fetish for worship. The dominant chord of what might be termed intellectual etiquette was struck when old rules were broken, or old authority reviled.

In the face of such revolution, how can we account for the tenacity with which some of those earlier customs still retain their hold? Why do we continue to wear mourning, for instance? Under the ancient régime there was doubtless a certain appropriateness between the forms of such dress and the usages from which they were established. These are still maintained among semi-civilized nations. The white-robed Chinese withdraws even from official public duty while he wears the garb of sorrow; the Japanese remains in absolute privacy; the Feejee Islander hides his burned body and mutilated hands from sight. The Greeks, the Romans, the Syrians, the Persians, mourned their dead in remote and solitary places. There was probably a time when, even for us, pleasure was made to halt at sight of crape wrappings, and when the "inky cloak" really personified the gulf between the world and the mourner.

How is it to-day? The most conservative devotee of conventionalism would find himself strangely put about to carry out such a programme. Propriety has yielded to the eager knocking of the world at its doors, and to its importunate demands upon the attention which is still, under the sombre veil of its funereal trappings, supposed to be immovably fixed upon the contemplation of death. Human nature is weak. We rarely find the summons totally unheeded. So the uniform of retirement comes to be seen in conspicuous places. It is found in the streets, the shops, the lecture-room, the concert hall. We even meet it—in some of those shadings of graded grief prescribed by the rigorous dictum of fashion—assisting at afternoon teas, and those other functions of insipid entertainment which make up the somewhat unchristian year of this end of the century. How can one who has ever known the crushing but refining grace of sorrow bear this wretched travesty, which seems to measure for the public eye its successive stages of consolation? Or is there some special spiritual affinity between

judicious combinations of white and gray and violet, and the healing of a stricken soul? How the honesty of grief must shrink from this lie of apparent forgetfulness!

Or must we insult nature by assuming that it is necessary to keep desolate memory true to its task. Would the heart wander without sight of the sable garment? How otherwise can we bear to make public the most personal hurt humanity has to bear,—the one grief which intimately and only concerns one's self? We do not wear some peculiar mark to blazen forth suffering to our honor, or loss to our estate, or taint upon our morality. Yet society has much more to do with such misfortune than with our beloved dead. Why should we challenge the attention of the world to the one sorrow in which it has least interest?

Suppose we beg the question and allow that there is some occult harmony between black and consolation. There are still exceptions to be taken. Why must the widow and orphan be forced to choose a certain brand of cloth, a certain species of fur, a certain finish of ruche and lace? Or why should what is eminently proper this season be unfit for last year or the next? And what of the intrusion of worldliness which the preparation of these "customary suits of solemn black" thrusts into the first moments of bereavement. Those few precious hours of communion left on earth, to be broken in upon by questions of fit and style, by suggestions of quality and modishness from persons to whom your anguish is matter of curiosity only or speculation! What of the nervous depression from which so many sensitive natures suffer under the spiritual and material weight of those sombre trappings. What of cost—the matter of so little moment to the few, but of such anxious stress to the many. The whims or weakness of the rich woman lays a bitter cross upon the already overburdened shoulders of her poorer sister here; for the robing which is but etiquette for the one, becomes enforced religious duty for the other. The laws of caste among the Hindoos are not more rigid than those which bind such observances on the class least able to conform to them. It adds new horror to the deathbed of poverty—this knowledge of the inexorable force which will oblige the wife to spend her last cent, or to pawn her scant household plenishing, for the black which must be worn until it drops away from dirt and age.

To sum up in brief: the custom is outworn; it is an anachronism in the nineteenth century. It is unchristian; it clouds the spiritual significance of the resurrection with the ever-present expression of temporal loss. It is cruel; it forces helpless and innocent people into action which entails privation and unnecessary suffering. It is untruthful; it makes false outward show of changes in sentiment. And it is essentially vulgar; for it presses private affairs upon public notice; it thrusts claims of fashion and frivolity upon a time which most greatly moves the heights and depths of being; and it forces its superficial worldliness into the fiercest throes which can ever rend human nature. Why then do we still wear mourning?

MARY ELIZABETH BLAKE.

THE ENGLISH REPORTER.

DURING a long and varied experience of newspaper work on both sides of the Atlantic, it has struck me that the American newspaper man, particularly the reporter, has a much more interesting and eventful career than the English reporter. Both are engaged in the collection of news, but the